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ABSTRACT

Even though middle schools are important in retaining at-risk students, the organization and curriculum of most of them do not meet the developmental needs of young adolescents. Improvements should focus on making middle and junior high schools function less like large, impersonal high schools and more like caring, nurturing elementary schools, while offering a challenging, subject-specific curriculum. The size and departmentalized structure of middle schools tend to make students leaving self-contained elementary school classrooms feel vulnerable. The fragmented structure of middle schools allows teachers to specialize in subject areas, but weakens teacher-student relationships. Retaining middle school students in grade does not improve academic achievement and students who are retained are likely to feel embarrassed and stigmatized. Ability grouping, which becomes formalized in middle schools as academic levels become more fixed and obvious, results in social segregation, the reinforcement of racial stereotypes, and the promotion of negative self-images among minority students. Cooperative learning, where students of all ability levels work together in groups, is suggested as an alternative to tracking. Health education and career education should be emphasized in the curriculum. Teachers in middle grades should receive specialized training in adolescent development as well as in subject areas to improve teacher-student relationships. A list of eight references is appended. (FMW)

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# MIDDLE SCHOOL EDUCATION--
# THE CRITICAL LINK IN DROPOUT PREVENTION

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by Amy Stuart Wells

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

# DIGEST

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## MIDDLE SCHOOL EDUCATION— THE CRITICAL LINK IN DROPOUT PREVENTION

A student's decision to drop out of high school is often the end result of a long series of negative school experiences—academic failure, grade retention, or frequent suspensions—that begin before the ninth grade. Dropout prevention strategies, therefore, must be targeted at the middle school grades, when the stresses of schooling related to a more complex curriculum, a less personal environment, and the growing need for peer acceptance pose grave danger to already disadvantaged students (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1988).

Even though research demonstrates the importance of middle schools in retaining at-risk students, the organization and curriculum of most do not meet the needs of young adolescents, who are going through a tumultuous period of rapid physical development and emotional turmoil.

### Creating Smaller Schools within Middle Schools

Part of the problem in trying to restructure middle-school education is that intermediate schools come in a variety of different sizes and shapes. As many as 30 different middle-school grade configurations have been identified (Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, CREMS, 1987; 1988), with the two most popular types being the grade 6-8 middle schools, now found in about one-third of all school districts, and the grade 7-9 junior high schools.

Much of the research on improving middle and junior high schools is aimed at making them look less like large, impersonal high schools, and more like caring, nurturing elementary schools, while still offering students a challenging, subject-specific curriculum.

CREMS studies (1988) have shown that while the grade 6-8 middle schools tend to be smaller and less departmentalized than 7-9 junior high schools, close to 50 percent of all seventh graders change classrooms at least four times a day. Thus, at the point in their lives when young adolescents are feeling most vulnerable, many are forced to leave their self-contained elementary school classrooms, where they spent most of their day with one teacher and a small group of peers, for large, often impersonal middle schools or junior highs, where daily they attend as many as seven different classes taught by seven different teachers and attended by seven different sets of students (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1988).

### Increasing Personal Attention

While a more fragmented middle-school structure allows teachers in the school to specialize and be more expert in the subjects they teach, it also leads to weaker teacher-student relationships. As teachers try to deal with 30 different students every hour of the day, they have little time to address students' individual needs. They also have little time to contact parents or discuss student cases with their colleagues.

Yet, while less-departmentalized schools allow teachers to form closer relationships with their students, one study found that sixth graders in these situations were achieving at a significantly lower level (CREMS, 1987).

Thus, middle schools, especially those with at-risk students, must address both issues—positive student-teacher relationships and high achievement. Schools can do so by developing intermediate staffing practices, including semi-departmentalized and team teaching arrangements. For instance, one teacher may offer instruction in related subjects (such as science and mathematics) and share a fixed class of students with other teachers. Schools can also assign staff members to serve as "advocates and mentors" to individual students (CREMS, 1987).

This more personalized setting allows teachers to keep closer tabs on frequently absent students and to work with them and their parents to prevent truancy. The team teaching approach allows teachers to specialize and develop expertise while still being able to network with other teachers to help students with difficulties.

### Reforming Grade Retention Policy

Students who are held back one or more years are much more likely to leave school before graduating. Being retained one grade increases a student's chances of dropping out by 40-50 percent; those retained two grades have a 90 percent greater chance of dropping out (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1988).

While many students are held back in the early years of elementary school, retention is also quite common in the middle grades when teachers are looking for more specialized knowledge and academic achievement from their students. In the Boston school system, for example, nearly 12 percent of all sixth graders and 19 percent of all seventh graders were held back in 1987, compared with only 2 percent of all fifth graders (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1988).

Research has shown, however, that retaining middle school students does not improve academic achievement and may in fact signal that schools are not helping students compensate for academic deficiencies that began in elementary school (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986). Meanwhile, young adolescents are more likely to feel embarrassed and stigmatized than elementary students when they are held back.

**Eliminating Tracking**

Although the practice of grouping students according to their ability usually begins in the elementary schools, it becomes formalized in the middle school grades as the various academic levels become more fixed and obvious. Too often those students with the characteristics associated with potential dropouts—minority students, those from low-income or single-parent families, those with limited English proficiency or behavioral problems—end up in the lowest tracks. Young adolescents placed in lower tracks become locked into dull, repetitive instructional programs leading at best to minimum competencies. Moreover, students who have difficulty in just one subject area often end up in the lower track for all of their classes, preventing them from becoming high achievers in areas in which they excelled in elementary school.

Tracking young adolescents also restricts social interaction between students with different interests and abilities at a point in their lives when they are formulating long-lasting perceptions of themselves and their peers. Because minority students are consistently placed in lower level classes, tracking segregates students, reinforcing prejudices and fostering a feeling among young minority students that only whites can be high achievers.

**Promoting Cooperative Learning**

One possible alternative to tracking in the middle grades is cooperative learning where students of all ability levels work together in groups and receive group rewards as well as individual grades. Cooperative learning is especially appealing for middle grade students because it allows them to develop their interpersonal communication skills at a time when they are particularly focused on social interactions.

In some situations students learn thinking strategies more efficiently from each other than they do from the teacher (Strahan & Strahan, 1988). They are responsive to each others' ideas and groups often solve problems more efficiently than students working alone.

**Revitalizing the Curriculum**

Health education should be an essential component of any middle school curriculum. Health courses need to include everything from instruction on proper nutrition to the effects of alcohol on the body. Also, given that teenage pregnancy is one of the most frequently cited reasons why girls drop out of school, and that the age at which boys and girls become sexually active continues to decline, exposing middle grade students to a complete sex education curriculum could prove to be highly beneficial.

Natriello et al. (1988) stress that providing adolescents with career education increases the salience of the school curriculum by showing students how the skills they are learning today can benefit them in 10 or 20 years.

**Improving the Student Teacher Relationship**

Much of the research on why students drop out points to negative teacher-student interactions. Likewise, students who stay in school often cite a "good teacher" as one of the most positive elements of their school experience. While adolescents tend to pull away from adults in their attempt to become independent, they paradoxically also have a strong need to bond with them.

Bhaerman and Kopp (1986) found that students are less likely to leave school when they work with teachers who are flexible, positive, creative, and person-centered rather than rule-oriented. Effective teachers should also maintain high expectations for all of their students and show they care about their students' success.

Many middle grade teachers, however, lack adequate training on early adolescence (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). Most are prepared to teach either elementary or high school students, and view their job in the middle schools as a "way station" before going on to assignments that they prefer.

Middle grade teaching is a legitimate, specialized profession. These teachers should be specially trained in adolescent development as well as in a subject area. As they counsel and mentor their students through their middle school years, teachers will be providing a climate that supports and nurtures at-risk students, and removing much of the school-based impetus for dropping out.

—Amy Stuart Wells

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